

**Brief Summary of Opening Comments at Village Power 98**  
**Presented at Village Power 98**  
**Scaling Up Electricity Access for Sustainable Rural Development**  
**Washington, D.C., October 6-8, 1998**

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*Background*

This is the fifth Village Power workshop sponsored by NREL. We have held these meetings every year since 1993, to focus, challenge, and provide a forum for interaction among practitioners working in the field of using renewable energy technologies as an economically viable pathway to electrification of rural populations throughout the world.

Starting with a small group of 30 colleagues in 1993, this “workshop” has doubled in size every year. When the NREL staff was planning for this meeting, they were hoping for something around 400 participants. We are now looking at over 500, and we apologize for the somewhat cramped accommodations.

This overwhelming response, however, shows that the use of renewable energy to solve some of the world’s serious problems is coming of age. This meeting, this “conference” (it’s clearly no longer a workshop) marks a transition.

A transition from the viewpoint that

renewables are, and forever will be a technology of the future;

to the reality that renewables have come of age,

We have technologies available today, at today’s prices, that can make a substantive contribution to the pressing needs of environmentally sustainable development in the world.

*Challenges*

This reality is not without its challenges, of course:

Our key challenges now are:

How to grow this emerging technical and financial opportunity into a business reality that is large enough to matter – an unprecedented scale of implementation that can have serious energy significance on the world’s energy future.

And how to do this quickly enough that it can begin to contribute to global environmental stabilization in a timeframe that matters.

Meeting these challenges and being effective supporters of renewable energy development and scale up, at a time of fiscal conservatism in the U.S. renewable energy sponsorship; and at a time of global economic slowdown in many of the countries with the biggest need for renewable energy deployment today – is itself a challenge.

But the community of dedicated practitioners is clearly growing. All you have to do is look around the room. A few years ago, everybody coming to the Village Power workshops knew a large percentage of their participating colleagues. I suspect that even the most experienced of you don't know more than 30 percent of the people in this room. This is good news! The community is growing, each of you with your own support, participating from your own unique perspective. Strength is in numbers. Strength is in diversity. You now have "critical mass" in both of these.

This Village Power '98 Conference, with its subtitle: "Scaling up Electricity Access for Sustainable Rural Development" is clearly a timely event.

Have a great Conference, meet some new friends, and make your own mark on moving renewable energy technologies ahead in the global marketplace.